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ABSTRACT

Of the 22 million children currently enrolled in U.S. schools, more than 2 million have limited English proficiency. Preschoolers and elementary-age children make up the greatest proportion of the immigrant student population, and many teachers need support in educating these young, linguistically diverse students. This digest reviews proven educational strategies for working with Mexican and other immigrant children. Myths about the second-language learner and the complexity and lengthiness of the process of second-language acquisition are briefly discussed. The following teaching strategies for preschool and elementary teachers are described: 1) encourage development of the child's first language; (2) provide visible signs of children's first language, and learn Spanish; (3) learn about Mexican culture, and teach acceptance; (4) be sensitive to children's struggles, and follow a classroom routine; (5) acknowledge children's strengths, and use portfolio-style assessment; (6) plan real-world language lessons, and provide a print-rich environment; (7) communicate clearly; (8) allow for the developing stages of language production; (9) aim for comprehension; and (10) allow children opportunities to practice their language skills with peers, and encourage student participation. (Contains 29 references.) (SV)

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DIGEST

Of the 22 million children currently enrolled in schools in the United States, more than 2 million have limited English proficiency (Macias, 2000). Preschoolers and elementary-age children make up the greatest proportion of the immigrant student population. Given these demographic trends, many teachers need support in educating young children from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Soto, 1991). The following review outlines strategies for working with Mexican and other immigrant children. The effectiveness of these research-based approaches has been affirmed by teachers.

Myths about the Second-Language Learner

A teacher's limited experience with second-language learners may lead her to believe that using the child's home language interferes with the child's ability to learn English (McLaughlin, 1992). Well-educated and less-educated bilingual parents frequently relate stories of well-meaning teachers who advised them, "You should stop speaking Spanish at home so your child can learn English." Because language and culture are intimately related, Byrnes and Cortéz (1992) note that disregarding a child's native language is denying a part of who the child is and the cultural background the child brings to school. In addition, parent-child communication can be eroded if parents are persuaded that speaking in their native language is not in their child's best interest (Fillmore, 1991). Research literature indicates that bilingualism is in the best interest of children; the intellectual experience of learning two languages contributes to concept formation and mental flexibility (Cummins, 1991; García, 1986; Genishi, 2002). When teachers respect and promote the development of the first language and encourage maintenance of the home culture, children feel cared for and connected to their family, school, and community (McGroarty, 1986).

Language Acquisition Process

Language acquisition is a complex process that may take a minimum of 12 years (Collier, 1989). Even when children seem to understand and express themselves in a second language, they may not have mastered more complex uses of the language that incorporate content knowledge in different subjects (August & Hakuta, 1997). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (1996) advises that when we set unrealistic expectations too early, school assessments of seemingly proficient children may identify them as lacking vocabulary and problem-solving skills. Misreading the language development process can result in immigrant children being over-referred to special education (Baca & Cervantes, 1998; Harry, 1994).

Teaching Strategies for Early Childhood Teachers

Encourage development of the first language. As we encourage children to maintain their first language we also support the development of the second language. When students feel relaxed and confident, language learning is maximized (Krashen, 1992). We know that literacy developed in the first language will transfer to the second language (Ada, 1993; García, 1986; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Teachers and families can use materials, such as children's books in Spanish, to build children's confidence in their literacy skills (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Provide visible signs of children's first language, and learn Spanish. Teachers can label classroom objects and areas in Spanish. Authentic materials that incorporate labels and texts should be provided (for example, signs, catalogs, toys, household objects, newspapers, and menus). Teachers may also serve as role models by learning and using a few words of Spanish, thus demonstrating that taking risks in learning another language is valued (Calderon, 1997).

Learn about Mexican culture, and teach acceptance. If teachers share knowledge of the Mexican culture, all children in the class may benefit from opportunities to learn about language and cultural differences and similarities (Lindholm, 1994; Wyner, 1989). Teachers can influence the motivation of their Mexican immigrant students by creating an accepting social environment (McGroarty, 1986). Classmates can be challenged to understand what it feels like to be somewhere where people speak a language different from their own and, thus, not understand what is going on around them (Kubota et al., 2000).

Be sensitive to children's struggles, and follow a routine. Entering a new class can be intimidating for an immigrant child who may be faced with social isolation and linguistic constraints. Establishing and following predictable routines can be helpful. The routines allow children to concentrate on the language and what they are supposed to be learning, rather than on figuring out what is happening (García, 1992).

Acknowledge children's strengths, and use portfolio-style assessment. We tend to emphasize what the child does not know, forgetting to allow children to display their interests and knowledge that often surpasses the limitations of language. When we regard children as capable, we are more likely to see their unique strengths and build upon them. Teachers face the challenge of fairly assessing the knowledge of immigrant students (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996). Observational notes recording children's abilities as demonstrated in the flow of classroom activities can be combined with samples of student work in a portfolio. This approach can supplement report cards in conveying evidence of students' progress (Genesee & Hamayan, 1994; Leone & College, 1995; Tabors, 1998).

Plan real-world language lessons, and provide a print-rich environment. Field trips, lessons with animals and plants, role-playing, and demonstrations of real-life activities can form the basis for language lessons (Krashen, 1992). Conducting pre- and post-discussions, writing a story together about the experience, cutting out sentences and rearranging their order, and changing the story by changing some words are game-like activities that enhance language and literacy learning.

Communicate clearly. Teachers can maximize learning by speaking clearly, using concrete references, repeating and rephrasing, and utilizing gestures and visual aids. Speaking

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more slowly at first and using simplified English without distorting the language are also recommended (Freeman & Freeman, 1998).

Allow for the developing stages of language production. Teachers working with children in the initial preproduction or silent stage may help the children "take in" the language by including music, movement, and dramatic play. Teachers may respect the silent phase by not requiring a child to speak, as well as by accepting forms of communication such as writing, drawing, and nonverbal responses. Children in the second stage of language acquisition (early production) may be asked questions that require a "yes" or "no" response, or that require them to identify a familiar object or finish a statement. Subsequently, in the final expansion or production stage, teachers can motivate students to be more descriptive (Krashen, 1992).

Aim for comprehension. Communicating meaning should always be the aim for teachers of a new language. Parroting teachers' speech does not promote language acquisition. A great deal of trial and error takes place as a young child learns a language. In addition, there are individual differences in language-learning time frames. Teachers may be supportive by having accepting attitudes during the trial and error phases. Instructional practices that emphasize grammar and construction are not recommended as they may interfere with the developmental progression of language acquisition. Songs and chants are excellent for reinforcing pronunciation and correct word stress (Freeman & Freeman, 1998).

Allow children opportunities to practice their language skills with peers, and encourage student participation. It is important for children to practice their language skills with peers. Teachers should structure interactions to ensure that second-language learners do not become socially isolated. Shared reading, cross-age activities, cooperative learning groups, peer tutoring, and community inquiry are valuable for all children (Slavin & Fashola, 1998).

Conclusion

In the preceding paragraphs, we have outlined effective strategies for facilitating immigrant Mexican students' language learning and cultural adjustment. Second-language learners benefit from contextual experiences that allow them to construct meaning for what otherwise would be merely words. Teachers hold the key to making the learning of young Mexican immigrant children a success through research-based, developmentally appropriate practices.

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